


WAS BAUDRILLARD A NIHILIST?

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[Simulakrum](#), [simulation](#) / Von [Ashley Woodward](#)

Introduction



*I am a nihilist. If it is nihilistic to be obsessed by the mode of disappearance, and no longer by the mode of production, then I am a nihilist.*¹

The question announced in the title of this paper, for which I wish to open a space of reflection, appears to be foreclosed from the very beginning by Baudrillard's candid admission in the quotation I have chosen as an epigraph. Moreover, the characterization of Baudrillard as a nihilist has practically assumed the status of a *doxa* in the secondary literature. Frequently, he has been portrayed as a thinker who has abandoned all effective criteria for critical analysis and judgment, and whose own theory simply exacerbates the indeterminacy and uncertainty that he sees in the current state of society. As such, he has been found guilty of epistemological and political nihilism.² In his essay "Baudrillard's Nihilism and the End of Theory," for example, Anthony King argues that Baudrillard "has renounced all critique and, instead, opted for nihilism". Consequently, "Baudrillard's later writings demonstrate exactly what critical theorists must *not* do".³ It may appear, then, that the case is firmly closed before it can even be opened: Baudrillard *was* a nihilist.

Where nihilism is concerned, however, matters are never this simple. Nietzsche declared himself "the first perfect nihilist of Europe",⁴ and yet his exact understanding of and relation to nihilism remain matters of scholarly debate.⁵ As Nietzsche himself tells us, nihilism is ambiguous,⁶ and this ambiguity demands that close attention be paid to the type(s) of nihilism in question when we ask whether or not Baudrillard (or anyone else) is a nihilist. Those scholars who have paid some sustained attention to Baudrillard's relation to nihilism in the more-nuanced Nietzschean sense, however, have also reached conclusions similar to

King's: they have interpreted him as a *passive* nihilist, content to dwell on the disappearance of meaning. In Baudrillard's thought, they contend, there is no sustained attempt to offer an alternative to the nihilism of contemporary culture, or to transcend it towards a Nietzschean affirmation of life. Paul Foss, in the provocatively titled essay "Despero Ergo Sum," compares Baudrillard's supposed passive or "negative" nihilism unfavourably with Nietzsche's active nihilism, arguing that "whereas Nietzsche goes beyond the (apparent) last stage [of nihilism], namely, the engulfment of the world by pure negativity, this is precisely where Baudrillard collapses, 'melancholy and fascinated'".⁷ Douglas Kellner offers a similar perspective, writing that "Baudrillard completely divests himself of any Nietzschean vitalism or celebration of life and the body. Nietzsche's *Gay Science* and moods of joy also dissipate in the Baudrillardian atmosphere of melancholy".⁸

Without denying the melancholy, even pessimistic, tone of much of Baudrillard's writing, I wish to show that his relation to the problem of nihilism was far more nuanced and complex – and in general, far more *critical* – than these writers suggest.⁹ My strategy will be to show that it is possible to identify moments in Baudrillard's work of all the major types of nihilism identified by Nietzsche, each of which have a significantly different meaning and valence, and some of which are steps on the path to overcoming nihilism itself. In what follows, I shall offer an interpretation of Baudrillard's thought which unfolds each of these moments in turn. This interpretation is not intended to be a reductively accurate summary of the many nuances in either Nietzsche's or Baudrillard's thought, but rather it is offered as a strategic method for highlighting the nuanced nature of Baudrillard's relation to nihilism *contra* the prevailing perspectives. Moreover, I shall argue that what emerges from such a reading is that Baudrillard's concern was always the attempt to find an effective *response* to the nihilism of the current situation. Indeed, I wish to show that Baudrillard's entire *oeuvre* may be read as a sustained critical engagement with the problem of nihilism, arguably one of the most

profound and subtle treatments of this problem since Nietzsche's own. Because of the very nature of the nihilism he diagnosed, however, Baudrillard vacillated concerning whether or not an effective response to contemporary nihilism is ultimately possible. Following one of Baudrillard's own strategies, I shall conclude that this vacillation suggests that the answer to the question "Was Baudrillard A Nihilist?" is best answered with reference to two undecidable hypotheses, each of which accord to a different type of nihilism identified by Nietzsche.

Nietzschean themes

*I was a great devotee of Nietzsche ...All in all, Nietzsche was never, strictly speaking, a reference for me, but an ingrained memory.*¹⁰

While Baudrillard's explicit references to Nietzsche are relatively rare, comments he has made in interviews (such as those above) indicate the importance of Nietzsche to his thought, and justify the use of Nietzsche's work as a hermeneutic tool in interpreting Baudrillard's texts. The pervasive, if elusive, influence of Nietzsche in these texts is indicated by Baudrillard as follows:

*Nietzsche is in me in the mode of the unzeitgemäss, as he puts it himself, the mode of the untimely...Nietzsche is, then, the author beneath whose broad shadow I moved, though involuntarily, and without even really knowing I was doing so.*¹¹

My strategy in this paper is to outline the “broad shadow” of Nietzschean nihilism, and show how Baudrillard’s thought has moved beneath it.

In presenting Nietzsche’s understanding of nihilism, I shall follow Alan White’s typology, which he has derived from an analysis of the many different ways in which Nietzsche used the term, and which provides some much-needed clarification of a very ambiguous idea.¹² White identifies what he calls three “fundamental levels” of nihilism:¹³ 1) Religious nihilism; 2) Radical nihilism [the two major types of which are active and passive nihilism]; and 3) Complete nihilism.

All of the many different ways Nietzsche uses the term “nihilism,” White argues, can be situated according to this fundamental typology. The typology itself, in dividing nihilism into basic levels, explains how the different types of nihilism relate to each other. While Nietzsche applies nihilism as a critical concept to the general history and culture of communities as well as to the individual, for the sake of brevity and clarity of exposition I will also follow White in presenting the different types of nihilism as individual psychological or existential states.

The religious nihilist is one who judges that the phenomenal world of becoming is without meaning or value in itself, and who believes in a source of value which transcends the world, and which gives the world meaning. Nietzsche thus claims that nihilism has a twin origin in the Platonic and Christian interpretations of the world, both of which posit a “true world” beyond “this world.” This transcendent source of value provides life with “purpose,” unity,” and “truth,” qualities thought missing in the world of everyday experience.¹⁴ The religious nihilist is only an “unconscious nihilist”; she would not call herself a nihilist because she holds a firm set of values.¹⁵ However, religious nihilism may be called nihilism in at least two senses. First, it denies that the world of becoming has any value in itself, thus

negating the value of the world of everyday experience. Value is itself *absent* and *deferred*, since it has its true location in a transcendent realm, and is only to be gained in its fullness through some future redemption, in the afterlife or at Final Judgment. The world of becoming that we experience in everyday life thus exhibits a *lack* in relation to this source and true locus of value. Second, by setting up transcendent values, it prepares the way for further forms of nihilism in which these values are found lacking.

The radical nihilist comes to realize that there is no evidence that the “true world” actually exists, and so we have no right to believe in the values which it supports. As Nietzsche has it, values such as unity, purpose, and truth are posited solely as an answer to human psychological needs, and lack reality in themselves. It is the very value of truth, pursued to its logical end, which brings the radical nihilist to the conclusion that no “true world” exists. For this reason, Nietzsche gives one definition of nihilism as the condition in which “*the highest values devalue themselves*”.¹⁶ In a passage which effectively summarizes this “radical” level of nihilism, he writes:

*One simply lacks any reason for convincing oneself that there is a true world. Briefly: the categories “aim,” “unity,” “being” which we used to project some value into the world – we pull out again; so the world looks valueless.*¹⁷

The crucial point on this level of nihilism is that the radical nihilist retains an investment in the “highest values” which transcend the world, but despairs because she finds these values lacking reality. On this level, one passes from an “unconscious” nihilism to a “conscious” nihilism.

However, there are two ways in which the radical nihilist might respond to her nihilism, and these constitute the types *active* and *passive* nihilism. Nihilism is *ambiguous*: Nihilism as a sign of increased power of the spirit: as *active* nihilism. Nihilism as decline and recession of the power of the spirit: as *passive* nihilism.¹⁸ Active nihilism is “a violent force of destruction”.¹⁹ The radical nihilist who responds to her situation with an increased energy or force is not content to remain in a position where the “highest values” are retained, but proceeds to actively destroy those values. (Nietzsche’s own polemics against the traditional values of philosophy, religion, morality, and culture may be taken as an example of active nihilism.) This process of active destruction, if carried through to its logical conclusion, will then lead to complete nihilism. The *passive* nihilist, however, is a radical nihilist who lacks the strength to carry out this process of destruction, and remains in a position of defeated pessimism. The passive nihilist has observed the bankruptcy of the “highest values,” but fails to destroy them completely and resigns herself to viewing the world pessimistically from within their horizon. As we have seen, it is this form of nihilism of which Baudrillard has been accused, and below we will examine the presence of this form of nihilism in his thought in more detail.

Complete nihilism, the third level White identifies, is achieved by the active nihilist who has completed the process of the destruction of transcendent values. In a sense, the complete nihilist is left with nothing – a complete annihilation of value. However, complete nihilism is also a point of transformation,²⁰ since the annihilation of transcendent categories of valuation places the complete nihilist in a position to affirmatively value the world of becoming. As such, the complete nihilist is in a sense no longer a nihilist, since a new form of affirmative valuation becomes possible. As White puts this: “One is a complete nihilist only when one has completed nihilism, thereby ceasing to be a nihilist”.²¹ It is only from the perspective of others, who have not completed nihilism and who cling to

transcendent values, that the complete nihilist appears to be a nihilist, since she denies the reality of the only values they are able to recognize. These three main levels thus present a process of development through nihilism as a series of psychological or existential states, to the point where it overcomes itself. This process is announced by Nietzsche when he writes that he is “the first perfect nihilist of Europe who, however, has even now lived through the whole of nihilism, to the end, leaving it behind, outside himself”.²²

Just as Baudrillard rarely explicitly references Nietzsche, his explicit deployment of the rhetoric of nihilism is occasional, his most extended statement on the topic being the paper “On Nihilism”.²³ This paper, however, links some of Baudrillard’s recurrent theoretical concerns, such as the phenomena of simulation and the theme of seduction, with this topic, allowing a reading of much of his work in terms of this Nietzschean theme. Furthermore, Baudrillard’s concerns from his earliest works have been with the possibility (or impossibility) of meaningful²⁴ life in the contemporary social system, and in this sense we may arguably see his entire *oeuvre* as an extended meditation on the problem of nihilism in contemporary culture. Beginning from Baudrillard’s early works, then, I shall proceed to identify moments in the development of his thought which exhibit the main types of Nietzschean nihilism just outlined.

III. Baudrillard as religious nihilist

In the early phase of his career, Baudrillard both identifies a form of religious nihilism in consumer society, and – arguably – exhibits a form of religious nihilism in his own thought through the idea of symbolic exchange. In his first two books, *The System of Objects* and *The Consumer Society*,²⁵ Baudrillard follows Marx in expressing a concern with the impoverished quality of life in the capitalist system. In these early works, he diagnoses and criticizes a form of religious nihilism operative in the capitalist system. This diagnosis proceeds by way of a principal

innovation: the supplementation of Marx's analysis of the commodity in terms of use value and exchange value with a third category of value: sign value. His argument is that in the most recent mutation of capitalism, consumption has taken over from production as the primary way in which the capitalist system reproduces itself, and that what is consumed is neither use value nor economic exchange value, but sign value. Baudrillard draws on the semiological methods of Roland Barthes' *The Fashion System*²⁶ to show how objects in a consumer society are organized into a differential system in which they signify social status. The consumption of the sign value of commodities is a process of social integration, in which subjects are defined by their relations to signifying objects. He argues that since the consumption of the sign value of objects is the primary mode of social integration, the categories of objects available for consumption "tyrannically" induce categories of persons (the system of consumption thus being reductive of the possibilities of human existence). Baudrillard notes the nihilistic effects of the system of objects as follows: "The very project of life, segmented, dissatisfied, and signified, is reclaimed and annulled in successive objects".²⁷ Moreover, the nihilism of the society of consumption is theorized by Baudrillard in terms which echo Nietzsche's analysis of religious nihilism; consumerism is a system of endlessly deferred value, predicated on a meaningful "totality" (fully satisfied consumer desire) which can never be achieved. He writes: "At the heart of the project from which emerges the systematic and indefinite process of consumption is a frustrated desire for totality...It is ultimately because consumption is founded on a *lack* that it is irrepressible".²⁸ The consumption of sign value is the consumption of an *idea* rather than a concrete relation. Sign value always defers satisfaction by referring the process of consumption to another object/sign in the system.

Baudrillard theorizes the nihilism of the capitalist system in more detail by arguing that the system of objects and their sign values is organized according to

a *code*. This idea of “the code” is an important critical concept in Baudrillard’s early work, giving formal semiological expression to the underlying logic of the capitalist society of consumption that he seeks to criticize. In general terms, a code is a system of rules for the combination of stable sets of terms into messages.²⁹ In capitalist consumer societies, these messages take the form of *signals*, signs which have a unidirectionality from sender to receiver and are irreversible. In this sense, the code is an objective system which imposes itself on subjects, who cannot in turn influence or change the code itself. In Gary Genosko’s words, “The code *terrorizes* the process of communication by fixing the two poles of sender and receiver and by privileging the sender”.³⁰ The code reduces ambiguity in meaning by imposing a structured system of clear distinctions and categories on social relations. Advertising is a means of disseminating the code, attaching specific sign values to specific objects and structuring social reality according to this reductive system of meanings. In its twin function of *reduction* and *deferral*, the code is in effect a semiological model of how nihilism manifests in the contemporary capitalist system: it employs the semiological theory of meaning to articulate the impoverishment of existential meaning.

In spite of this critical analysis of religious nihilism in the capitalist system, Baudrillard is himself accused of failing to escape religious nihilism by Jean-François Lyotard in his book *Libidinal Economy*, published in 1974.³¹ The reasons underlying this accusation are most clearly expressed in Baudrillard’s *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*,³² a collection of essays from 1972 which both formalize his early critical project and begin to undermine it. The formalization of Baudrillard’s project of Marxian semiology takes place in the essay “For a General Theory.” This formalization is of interest because it shows, in semiological terms, how Baudrillard’s early orientation is open to the criticism of religious nihilism by setting up the critical concept of symbolic exchange as a

transgressive and *transcendent* ideal in contrast to the nihilism of capitalist political economy.

Symbolic exchange is Baudrillard's name for the form of exchange he believes was manifest in pre-capitalist societies.³³ This concept is influenced primarily by the works of Marcel Mauss and George Bataille. From Bataille, Baudrillard takes the idea that the capitalist economy of production, accumulation, and utility perverts a more primary human drive to an economy of waste, excess, expenditure, sacrifice, destruction, and death.³⁴ Baudrillard argues, however, that Bataille's "solar economy" of unilateral gift-giving (pure expenditure without production or accumulation, like the sun's expenditure of energy) needs to be corrected with reference to Mauss' analysis of the gift or the *potlatch*, in which gift-giving always institutes the obligation of a counter-gift.³⁵ Baudrillard takes from Mauss the idea that gift-giving in "primitive" societies takes place in a network of cultural symbols, and founds the social bond itself in an economy of symbolic exchange. As we have seen, according to Baudrillard capitalist political economy gives objects a determinate (and therefore non-ambivalent) meaning according to sign value, and transmits these meanings unidirectionally through "the code," grouping passive social subjects into "categories of persons." In contrast, Baudrillard's symbolic exchange is *ambivalent* (meaning is open to indeterminacy and variation), *reversible* (meaning is subject to two-way exchange), and constitutes a *challenge* in the form of the obligatory counter-gift (social subjects are called upon to actively respond in the system of exchange).

In the essay "For a General Theory," Baudrillard proposes a "general articulation" of the relationships between the four kinds of value he has previously used in his critical writings on the capitalist system – use value (UV), economic exchange value (EcEV), sign value, and symbolic exchange value (SbE) – in a single formula³⁶ :

EcEV / Sr

—— / — SbE

UV Sd

Baudrillard here breaks sign value into the two component parts of the Saussurean sign, signifier (Sr) and signified (Sd), and places symbolic exchange outside of the system of political economy. The equation on the left-hand side of the formula means that economic exchange value is to the signifier as use value is to the signified. Baudrillard interprets use value and the signified as *alibis* for the structural dominance exerted by economic exchange value and the signifier, a theme he expands on in other papers in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. Baudrillard explains that the bars in this expression have different meanings: the horizontal bars between economic exchange value and use value, signifier and signified are bars of formal logical implication which establish a structural relation. The diagonal bar between the system of political economy and symbolic exchange, however, is one of radical exclusion, which suggests an exile of symbolic exchange from the total field of value.³⁷ While initially identifying symbolic exchange as a value, then, Baudrillard now insists that it is not a value at all – the equation between the commodity and the sign of the left-hand side of the formula is the system of political economy and the sphere of value, while symbolic exchange, on the right-hand side, is the *transgression* of this sphere.

Another important essay from the 1972 collection, “Towards a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign,” explains the political task that this semiological analysis suggests. Baudrillard had previously focused on the sign values of commodities, arguing that the commodity is a kind of sign. He now argues that the sign is also a kind of commodity, writing that “*the logic of the commodity and of political economy is at the very heart of the sign*”.³⁸ This is implied by the formula worked out in “For a General Theory,” and Baudrillard extends the

implications of the homology between the commodity and the sign to argue that semiology and structuralism – which take the Saussurean sign as their basic unit of analysis – are implicated in the system of political economy and cannot therefore function as adequate theoretical bases of critique. Moreover, the “semio-linguistic” theory of meaning, like the capitalist system of commodities, is itself reductive of the more existentially rich form of meaning implied in symbolic exchange. Baudrillard thus no longer sees semiology as a useful method of analysing capitalism, but as a model of meaning bound up with capitalism and contributing to contemporary nihilism. He therefore argues that the critique of the system of political economy must include a critique of the sign, and employs a deconstructive method inspired by Jacques Derrida to enact this critique. This deconstructive method aims at a *transgression* of the system of political economy which will allow the return or renewal of symbolic exchange. Baudrillard is still motivated here by a Marxian revolutionary impulse, and asserts that in this revolution “even signs must burn”.³⁹

It is on this positing of symbolic exchange as a transgression of capitalist political economy that Lyotard critiques Baudrillard in *Libidinal Economy*. While he expresses admiration for Baudrillard’s work and calls him “brother”,⁴⁰ he engages in a strident critique of what he sees as the latter’s *nostalgia* for symbolic exchange, and arguing in effect that this nostalgia is a form of religious nihilism. Lyotard argues that the Marxian dream of a society without exploitation is nothing but a phantasy⁴¹ or myth, having no more reality than the “true world” posited by the religious nihilist. Baudrillard’s idea of symbolic exchange, he argues, is just a further permutation of this Marxian myth. While Baudrillard attempts to ground the idea of symbolic exchange in anthropological studies of “primitive societies,” Lyotard argues that Baudrillard’s conception of such societies is unrealistically utopian.

According to Lyotard, Baudrillard conceives symbolic exchange as “a give-and-take heedless of the conservation of goods”;⁴² it is a game of mutual challenge which might lead to the wasteful expenditure of goods to a point which is purely destructive. In opposition to Baudrillard, Lyotard argues that “there are no primitive societies,” by which he means that there are no societies free from the conservation and economic regulation of goods which marks the capitalist system of production. Both capitalism and “primitive societies,” Lyotard argues, require the conservation and circulation of goods, and all such circulation is equivalent to the capitalist economy of production in that it administers life according to the demands of regulation. Where Baudrillard claims that “[t]here is neither a mode of production nor production in primitive societies”,⁴³ Lyotard argues that all societies are subject to similar economic regulation regardless of whether or not they use money or other, “less primitive,” forms of regulation. He explains:

*...the primitive society is also a capitalism....of course, savages do not capitalize goods; but who considers that it is only the fully mercantile instance of the great Zero that sanctions and indeed demands the scrupulous balancing of the inflows and outflows of affects (in the form of relatives, words, beasts, lives, sexes), hanging over and maintaining these societies?*⁴⁴

In positing the phantasy of primitive societies, Lyotard sees Baudrillard as nostalgic for a form of social exchange free from the devaluation of life by economic regulation which never really existed, and which cannot exist (at least in a pure form). In seeking to transgress the system of capitalist/semio-linguistic political economy, Baudrillard likewise stakes his hopes on the future

(re)institution of a pure form of symbolic exchange which is again an empty phantasy. Lyotard sees both *nostalgia* and *transgression* as marks of religious nihilism, akin to positing a paradisiacal innocence from which Mankind has fallen and a future redemption in a transcendent “true world.” The realm of symbolic exchange acts as a lost object which we must transgress the sphere of political economy to regain, and holds the same logical position as all the transcendent, suprasensible categories in Nietzsche’s analysis of religious nihilism.⁴⁵

Baudrillard never explicitly acknowledged the validity of Lyotard’s critique, and in fact responded with his own criticisms of Lyotard’s “libidinal economy”.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, given the later direction of Baudrillard’s thought, it appears that he came to see the limitations with symbolic exchange that Lyotard’s critique indicates. Baudrillard effectively acknowledges the veracity of Lyotard’s criticism in the much later overview of his *oeuvre*, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, while indicating that his later work moves beyond these problems:

*...after Symbolic Exchange and Death and with Seduction the dream of a transgression, of a possible subversion of codes, and the nostalgia for a symbolic order of any kind, born out of the deep of primitive societies, or out of historical alienation, have been lost. With Seduction, there is no longer any symbolic referent to the challenge of signs, no more lost object, no more recovered object, no more original desire.*⁴⁷

In Baudrillard’s early works, it may appear *prima facie* that his project of revolutionary, deconstructive transgression is a vigorous form of *active* nihilism,

driving towards an overcoming of the nihilism of capitalism-semiology. However, as Lyotard has shown and Baudrillard seems to have implicitly acknowledged, this early project of transgression is in fact haunted by the spectre of religious nihilism, for which its seemingly radical movement paves the way for a return.⁴⁸

Baudrillard as radical (active, passive) nihilist

In his later works, Baudrillard develops new critical concepts such as simulation and seduction, and moves away from the dream of transgression and his moment of religious nihilism. It is in these works that we can identify moments of *radical* nihilism, including the *passive* nihilism of which he has been accused. In his work in the nineteen-eighties, the nihilism of the contemporary system is understood primarily through the concept of *simulation*. Simulation – Baudrillard’s most celebrated but, arguably, least understood idea – is the fate of representation in the contemporary state of culture. Simulation occurs when a model or representation precedes the “real thing” it purports to be a model or representation of; simulations produce this “real” themselves rather than modelling a prior-existing reality. According to Rex Butler, one of Baudrillard’s most astute commentators, all of Baudrillard’s work may be seen as an exploration of “the paradox of representation,” and this paradox explains the underlying logical structure of simulation. This paradox states that the more a copy resembles an original, the less it resembles it. If a copy resembles an original *exactly* it is no longer a copy, but another original. A copy which is too good is paradoxically a bad copy, and by the same reasoning a bad copy might be a good copy.⁴⁹ The essential point of this paradox is that the copy and the original need a space, a gap, or a difference between them, in order to be distinguished as copy and original. Representation and reality, a model and its original, function in the same paradoxical way. Furthermore – and here we see the logic of simulation begin to operate – because the representational system can only function on the basis of a distance between representation and the real, once the gap has closed

and it has lost contact with the real, it has to *produce its own* real in order to continue to function. This real is not the (pre-existing) real which the model attempts to represent, but what Baudrillard calls the *hyperreal* – the *more real than real*.

It is this process of representation “overreaching” itself and producing its own real that Baudrillard calls *simulation*. With simulation, signifiers float free of any anchorage by signifieds or referents, since they produce these terms as their alibis. What Baudrillard describes is in a sense a loss of the real, but Baudrillard’s analysis takes place on two levels: on the level of the “alibi,” or the explanation simulated systems give themselves (a *descriptive* level), and on the level of Baudrillard’s own analysis of what is “really” going on (a *normative* or *critical* level). On the descriptive level of the alibi that systems of simulation work with, the real has never been more real. Simulation does not dispense with the real, but attempts to “realise” it by capturing it within its own system of representation. Simulation and hyperreality are not simply a product of an abstraction from the real, but the product of an excessive attempt to “realise the real” which inadvertently results in this abstraction. In hyperreality, we have not moved too far away from the real, but too far *toward* it.

Baudrillard draws out nihilistic implications from simulation, which he sees as continuing and exacerbating the nihilism of the political economy of the sign and the system of objects. Simulation is the new stage of nihilism that Baudrillard announces in the essay “On Nihilism.” Here he writes:

Today’s nihilism is one of transparency, and it is in some sense more radical, more crucial than in its prior and historical forms, because this transparency, this irresolution is indissolubly that of the system, and that of all the theory

*that still pretends to analyse it. When God died, there was still Nietzsche to say so – the great nihilist before the Eternal and the cadaver of the eternal. But before the simulated transparency of all things, before the simulacrum of the materialist or idealist realisation of the world in hyperreality (God is not dead, he has become hyperreal), there is no longer a theoretical or critical God to recognise his own.*⁵⁰

The transparency Baudrillard associates with contemporary nihilism is simulation; it is the loss of the distance between representation and the real. Baudrillard argues that when simulations no longer refer to an independent real, there is a confusion between models and their referents, resulting in a generalized epistemological nihilism. Theories float free from any reference in the real: each theory produces its own “real,” and there is thus no independent reference by which one theory may be judged better or worse than another. Simulation therefore leads to a relativism of all theory and the impossibility of knowledge.

As well as a collapse of the difference between representation and the real, Baudrillard argues that simulation entails the collapse of the difference between all binary oppositions (following Benveniste and Levi-Strauss, the basis of all meaning in structuralist theory). The real itself functions as the distance between such oppositions, the “third term” which mediates between them and allows judgements to be made about the relative veracity of theses and antitheses, or the relative application of one term or its opposite to the field under consideration. With the disappearance of this referential term, the distance

between binary oppositions effectively collapses, causing them to bleed into each other with the result of liquidating stable structures of meaning.

Baudrillard analyses this breakdown of binary oppositions in terms of the critical concept of the “imaginary.” For Baudrillard, this term indicates that “other” against which the self is defined, or that which is excluded by a system in its self-definition. Each term in a binary opposition functions as the imaginary of the other term: man is the imaginary of woman and vice versa, the Third World is the imaginary of the First World and vice versa, and so on.⁵¹ According to Baudrillard, simulated systems which have lost their reference in the real hide this loss by producing an imaginary, an opposite, which maintains the illusion that this reference still operates by upholding the binary oppositions which require this reference. Baudrillard calls this “the strategy of the real” or “the strategy of deterrence”.⁵²

Baudrillard calls the breakdown of clear distinctions between binary oppositions *reversibility*.⁵³ In simulation, systems become reversible, all hypotheses are equally plausible, and counter-hypotheses function to support their opposites and the system of simulation in general. Counter-hypotheses act as the imaginaries of hypotheses, and simply support a simulated system of imaginary oppositions where neither term has any purchase in the real. Baudrillard writes that:

...it is always a question of proving the real through the imaginary, proving truth through scandal, proving the law through transgression, proving work through striking, proving the system through crisis, and capital through revolution... The proof of theatre through ant theatre; The proof of art through anti-art; The proof of pedagogy

*through anti pedagogy; The proof of psychiatry through anti psychiatry...*⁵⁴

The loss of reference and reversibility of binary oppositions is thoroughly nihilistic because in this simulated state nothing is really at stake: the stakes the system predicates itself on are illusory. It is this implication of reversibility that accounts for the *passive* nihilism of which Baudrillard has been accused. While he earlier dreamed of a *transgression* of the system of political economy by symbolic exchange, in his analysis of the system as simulation he posits that the system is only strengthened by such transgressive gestures. Implicitly, Baudrillard now realizes that the bar between political economy and symbolic exchange is no different from the bar between exchange value and use value, signifier and signified: in a simulated system, the bar of radical exclusion also operates as a bar of structural implication. The reversibility of simulation explains Baudrillard's view that today's nihilism is in a way more crucial than its past forms, in that all oppositions to the nihilistic system can be absorbed by the system itself. Furthermore, Baudrillard is aware that his own discourse is subject to this incorporation; the discourse of the analysis of nihilism cannot pretend to an exterior position of enunciation, and all attempts to represent the simulated system, and even to criticize it, fall prey to simulation like any other form of representation or critical gesture.

Baudrillard indicates the pessimistic conclusions he draws from this realization that all oppositions to the system can be incorporated into the system itself:

Melancholia is the brutal disaffection that characterizes our saturated systems. Once the hope of balancing good and

*evil, true and false, indeed of confronting some values of the same order, once the more general hope of a relation of forces and a stake has vanished. Everywhere, always, the system is too strong: hegemonic.*⁵⁵

By Baudrillard's own admission, he is a nihilist in that he is obsessed by the mode of disappearance of meaning that characterizes contemporary culture. However, the theory of meaning he is concerned with here is precisely the one which he has analyzed as complicit with capitalism, and which he sees as nihilistic in that it is reductive of the richness of meaning available in the "symbolic." Baudrillard's radical nihilism of the passive variety thus has its parallel in Nietzsche: just as the radical nihilist still believes in the highest values, but doesn't think they find application in the world, in Baudrillard's moments of passive nihilism he still appears to believe in the value of the semio-linguistic order of meaning, or – expressed in terms of the problematic of simulation – the modern conceptions of "reality" and "rationality." Like Nietzsche's "highest values" this order of meaning *did* provide the world with meaning, and its passing is cause for some regret, but nevertheless it was always a system of meaning which was nihilistic in a religious sense and reduced the possibility of richer forms of life-affirmation.

Here, then, is another sense in which nihilism is radically ambiguous: on the one hand, simulation strengthens political economy, giving this system total hegemony in the power to incorporate all oppositions; on the other hand, simulation is itself a partial internal deconstruction of the system of meaning on which political economy is founded. This second point is one which Baudrillard sometimes emphasizes, and these points of emphasis constitute the moments of *active* nihilism in his discourse. Like Nietzsche, Baudrillard's analysis of the

nihilistic system is an attempt to push the nihilistic tendencies of this system to an extreme point, in the hope that the system will collapse, or – as we will see – undergo a kind of reversal. In this sense, Baudrillard displays traits of the active nihilist. He sometimes conceives of his work as a kind of theoretical terrorism; his gambit is that the closer systems of simulation approach perfection (the closer the gap or distance comes to being completely eradicated), the closer the system is to collapse. This stance is one Baudrillard also suggests in “On Nihilism”:

The more hegemonic the system, the more the imagination is struck by the smallest of its reversals...If being a nihilist, is carrying, to the unbearable limit of hegemonic systems, this radical trait of derision and violence, this challenge that the system is summoned to answer through its own death, then I am a terrorist and a nihilist in theory as the others are with their weapons. Theoretical violence, not truth, is the only resource left us.⁵⁶

This suggestion of active nihilism, however, is followed in this essay by another moment of passive nihilism and seeming defeat. He writes:

*But such a sentiment is utopian. Because it would be beautiful to be a nihilist, if there were still a radicality – as it would be nice to be a terrorist, if death, including that of the terrorist, still had meaning. But it is at this point that things become insoluble. Because to this active nihilism of radicality, the system opposes its own, the nihilism of neutralization. The system is itself also nihilistic, in the sense that it has the power to pour everything, including what denies it, into indifference.*⁵⁷

At this point, Baudrillard appears to collapse on the passive side of radical nihilism, as Foss and others have argued. Nevertheless, the essay ends on the following suggestive note:

*There is no more hope for meaning. And without a doubt this is a good thing: meaning is mortal. But that on which it has imposed its ephemeral reign, what it hoped to liquidate in order to impose the reign of the Enlightenment, that is, appearances, they, are immortal, invulnerable to the nihilism of meaning or of non-meaning itself. This is where seduction begins.*⁵⁸

It is with this concept of seduction, and the later critical concepts which develop its logic, that the further possibility of achieving complete nihilism and of thereby overcoming it manifests itself in Baudrillard's thought.

V. Baudrillard as complete nihilist

As his work progressed, Baudrillard drew further away from construing the nihilistic system and its more life-affirmative alternative in terms of opposition and transgression, and closer towards a position in which these two tendencies are seen as the reverse sides of a single process. This reconceptualization of nihilism and its alternative can be seen initially in Baudrillard's concept of "seduction," and it reaches its clearest expression in his writings on "impossible exchange." Seduction, along with the other "positive" terms of Baudrillard's thought, is given the following analysis by Butler in terms of the paradox of representation: "if simulation attempts to cross the distance between the original and the copy that allows their resemblance, seduction is both the distance that

allows this resemblance and the distance that arises when this space is crossed”.⁵⁹ Seduction is therefore the gap, the distance, the *nothingness* which the sign or the simulated system attempts to abolish, but which allows the operation of the system. Seduction is thus ambiguous and reversible: it is both what allows simulation, and is therefore complicit with it, and what simulation attempts to abolish, and is therefore also potentially subversive of it. Like symbolic exchange, seduction acts as a principle of meaning which is ambiguous, reversible, and which constitutes a challenge. Given the closely knit and ambiguous relation of simulation and seduction, however, there is no question of seduction being a “pure, life-affirmative” concept like symbolic exchange, which supposedly exists outside the sphere of the current system, which has been lost and which might be regained through transgression (and thus, no longer any question of religious nihilism).

In Baudrillard’s later writings on the “transfinite” and “impossible exchange” he again explicitly took up the issue of nihilism. These works arguably cash out the same basic ideas as simulation and seduction, but more clearly indicate the possibility of “complete” nihilism within the terms of Baudrillard’s thought. The transfinite is a term which extends Baudrillard’s idea of simulation; the “hyper-x” of simulation (hyperreality, hypertelie, etc.) is replaced with the “trans-x” of transfinitude, which includes permutations such as the transpolitical, the transaesthetic, the transsexual, and the transeconomic. Baudrillard equates simulation with the transfinite in the essay “The Precession of Simulacra” (in *Simulacra and Simulation*), but the term and its permutations receive more centrality in the later books *Fatal Strategies* and *The Transparency of Evil*.⁶⁰ The transfinite is a concept originating in set theory, and it was developed for application in linguistics by Julia Kristeva. Mike Gane explains that the transfinite “indicates that which has passed beyond the finite, which is thus ‘more than’ a finite figure, but is not infinite”.⁶¹ Baudrillard uses this term to indicate how a

system extends beyond its own bounds, but can never be absolutely totalizing. Like simulation, transfinite systems are hypertelic, meaning that they extend beyond their own ends. Just as Baudrillard analyses simulation as representation which has extended beyond its own end, to the point where it mutates into something quite different, so he analyses specific cultural systems of thought and value as extending beyond their ends and mutating. Baudrillard likens the transfinite hypertelos of systems to an orgy of liberation, in which every sphere of culture has “liberated” its subject matter from its traditional boundaries. He writes:

*The orgy in question was the moment when modernity exploded on us, the moment of liberation in every sphere. Political liberation, sexual liberation, liberation of the forces of production, liberation of the forces of destruction, women’s liberation, children’s liberation, liberation of unconscious drives, liberation of art.*⁶²

The effect of this orgy of liberation is to make the distinctions between cultural spheres break down; each sphere then becomes totalizing in itself: sexual liberation has made *everything* sexual, political liberation has made *everything* political, the liberation of the aesthetic has made *everything* aesthetic, etc. This transfinity of systems means that a total exchange between every term of the system becomes possible, and that every system is totalizing, leaving nothing outside of it (nothing that is not political, nothing that is not sexual, etc.) The transfinite thus effectuates an extension of the nihilism of the hyperreal; in transfinite systems all oppositions and all references disappear entirely, and the possibility of any valuations and critical judgments disappears with them.

Baudrillard's critical alternative to the transfinite is developed most clearly in the book *Impossible Exchange*.⁶³ Here Baudrillard introduces the idea of "the Nothing," a further addition to the category of "positive" terms which includes symbolic exchange and seduction; it indicates something which the transfinite diminishes and threatens with destruction, but which resists this destruction. As many commentators have noted, with *Fatal Strategies* Baudrillard's work takes a marked turn towards metaphysical speculation, and *Impossible Exchange* is perhaps the apogee of this tendency. He begins the title essay with a number of metaphysical propositions:

Everything starts from impossible exchange.

There is no equivalent of the world.... No equivalent, no double, no representation, no mirror. Any mirror whatsoever would still be part of the world.

*Since the world is a totality, there is nothing outside it with which it can be exchanged.*⁶⁴

Furthermore, what Baudrillard claims here about the world he claims is the case with any totalizing, or transfinite system: there being nothing outside of it, there is nothing with which it can be exchanged. This totality of systems accords with the transfinite expansion of cultural spheres which he examines in his earlier works.⁶⁵

Implicitly harking back to the semio-linguistic theory of meaning, which posits that meaning functions according to the exchange of signs, Baudrillard argues that such systems are meaningless. While all the terms within the system can be exchanged with each other, there is nothing outside the system with which the

system itself might be exchanged. He writes: “Literally, they have no meaning outside themselves and cannot be exchanged for anything”.⁶⁶ Baudrillard identifies this lack of meaning and value, stemming from the transfinitude of systems and their impossible exchange, as a new expression of nihilism. In his words, “The true formula of contemporary nihilism lies here, rather than in any philosophical or moral considerations: it is the nihilism of value itself...Here and now, the whole edifice of value is exchangeable for Nothing”.⁶⁷

his “Nothing,” however, has a “positive” sense as well as a negative one: it is the gap or distance which is indicated previously by terms such as seduction.

Simulation and the transfinite are those principles which try to eradicate the Nothing with pure positivity, to represent everything perfectly, to extend the light of reason to every corner of the world, to leave nothing left outside themselves. The Nothing, for Baudrillard, indicates both that there is nothing left outside the transfinite systems – hence a kind of nihilism of value – *and* that outside these systems, Nothing *is* left. Baudrillard is here enacting a kind of reversion of the term Nothing itself, from its function as a quantifier to its function as a substantive.⁶⁸ Baudrillard continues this reversion by valorizing the Nothing itself, asserting that “The Nothing is the only ground – or background – against which we can apprehend existence...In this sense, things only exist *ex nihilo*. Things only ever exist out of nothing”.⁶⁹ Baudrillard insists here, and elsewhere in his later works, that the transfinite system tries to eradicate the nothing through sheer positivity, but that the nothing inevitably continues as a “substratum” beneath Something.⁷⁰

For Baudrillard, today’s nihilism is one of an “over lit” world, where the light of reason has penetrated into every dark corner. Yet there is a sense in which light cannot help but cast shadows, and Baudrillard insists on the continuity of the Nothing beneath the total realization of the world, the attempt to turn everything

into Something. Like the seduction which is necessary for the functioning of simulation, the Nothing is necessary for the transfinite systems of meaning. Nothing, as Baudrillard tells us, is the background against which things stand out, and is necessary for any coherent meaning. More than merely surviving contemporary nihilism, however, the continued existence of the Nothing suggests the possibility for the completion and overcoming of nihilism. The more transfinite systems extend themselves, the more Nothing is left (in both negative and positive senses, as quantifier and substantive). This suggests the possibility of reaching a state in which nihilism is complete in the sense that there *really is* Nothing left; both in the sense that transfinite systems have extended themselves completely and in the sense that all value is eradicated and there is only Nothing. To draw an analogy with Nietzsche, this would be the point where complete nihilism is achieved because the highest values have devaluated themselves.

Of course, Baudrillard's ruminations on the Nothing may appear to be mere word-play, perhaps reminiscent of Gorgias' classic piece of sophistry *On Not-Being*.⁷¹

While Baudrillard discusses nihilism explicitly with reference to the Nothing, however, the possibility of nihilism reaching a complete stage is expressed in a variety of other terms, some of which are more concrete, in his works. Baudrillard frequently hints at the possibility of a "reversal"⁷² of contemporary nihilism which would signal the destruction, overcoming, or at least the retreat of semio-linguistic, capitalist, representational meaning and the foregrounding or dominance of a more existentially fulfilling form of meaning, indicated by terms such as seduction and the Nothing, and based on principles of reversibility, ambiguity, and challenge. The possibility of this reversal of nihilism into a more existentially meaningful state of thought and culture is explored through many registers in Baudrillard's work, and is expressed by further terms such as death, the anagram, evil, the vital illusion, the fragment, and so on. Perhaps most concretely, it is explored in his discussions of the destiny of modern technology,

where he suggests that the perfection of the capacity of technology to represent the real might reach a point where the hypothesis of reality itself – the alibi which upholds the representational model – collapses.⁷³

The completion of nihilism, Baudrillard implies, thus involves the extension of simulation or transfinitude to the point where they undermine themselves: simulation becomes so perfect a copy that the alibi of the reality principle (the original) becomes untenable; transfinite systems extend themselves to the point where there really is Nothing left. For Baudrillard, the completion and overcoming of nihilism would in a sense be simultaneous, just as they are for Nietzsche: with the collapse of the reality principle, the world of simulation appears as a world of mere appearances, governed by seduction. In the passage at the very end of the essay “On Nihilism” quoted at the end of section III above, Baudrillard posits the immortality of appearances, intimating their possible resurrection. Baudrillard’s “appearances” have their accord in Nietzsche’s work with the world of becoming (the world of mere phenomena), just as the reality principle underlying simulation accords with the “highest values” of aim, unity, and truth. It is the completion of nihilism as the perfection of simulation that will bring about this resurrection of appearances. What makes the simulated world nihilistic, so difficult to find meaning in, is the fact that we continue to live and think on the basis of the “highest values” of our time, the reality principle and the semio-linguistic model of meaning, which have themselves become radically unstable and basically untenable. Once nihilism becomes complete, and these values are finally destroyed, we will be able to see the world of becoming – the phantasmagoria of our hyperreality – as a re-enchanted, seductive world, a world of vital illusion and mere appearance. That is, we will be able to value the world as it appears, without referring it to illusory values such as “truth” and “reality” which have themselves become suspect. This, at least, is a suggested possibility which emerges through the reading of Baudrillard in comparison with Nietzsche that I am offering here.

In his most hopeful moments, Baudrillard prognosticates that the nihilistic world of technology, hyperreality, simulation, and transfinitude might progress far enough that it will be reversed into a revalued world of appearance. In certain passages Baudrillard makes this revaluation clear, suggesting the possibility of a subtle change in the order of things:

*We can't avoid going a long way with negativity, with nihilism and all. But then don't you think a more exciting world opens up? Not a more reassuring world, but certainly more twhrilling, a world where the name of the game remains secret. A world ruled by reversibility and indetermination.*⁷⁴

Seduction and the Nothing, then, indicate the possibility for a form of “active” nihilism which is not a transgression or destruction of the existing order, but its transformation through completion. The alternative to the nihilism of simulation is therefore not to be sought in anything outside or in opposition to the system, but in possibilities for its own transformation harboured by the system itself. The crucial point here, which distinguishes the active nihilism which tries to complete nihilism through seduction or the Nothing from the active nihilism that Baudrillard disavows as ineffectual in “On Nihilism,” is that because these principles do not take the form of an *opposition* to the system, they are not simply absorbed or nullified by it by becoming an “imaginary.” Nevertheless, a fundamental ambiguity and uncertainty remains: since seduction and the Nothing work to *support* the system as well as acting as a possible alternatives to it, there is nothing to guarantee that a reversal in the order of things will actually take place. While

these positive terms cannot be eradicated, they might very well continue in a relation of subordination to our nihilistic system.

This pessimistic hypothesis, which we might identify as another moment of passive nihilism in Baudrillard's thought, is well illustrated in his brief reflections on the fate of seduction in the capitalist system. In *Seduction*, he sees a disintensified, "cold" or "ludic" seduction as the dynamic force which underlies capitalist exchange. He writes that:

[w]ith a vague collusion between supply and demand, seduction becomes nothing more than an exchange value, serving the circulation of exchanges and the lubrication of social relations. What remains of the enchantment of that labyrinthine structure within which one could lose oneself?

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In effect, "cold" seduction is seduction reduced to that distance which is required for simulated systems to operate. Baudrillard understands this form of seduction as involving a maximal diffusion throughout the system and a minimal intensity of seductive effects. Cold seduction operates according to the same principle of reversibility and challenge accorded to seduction in general, but is reduced to the function of lubricating the economic and social relations which ensure the smooth operation of the capitalist system. Baudrillard calls this form of seduction "ludic," since it is seduction reduced to the playfulness of the capitalist system in which nothing is really at stake (since all moves in the economic game consolidate the strength of the system of exchange itself).

As I indicated in the introduction to this essay, Baudrillard vacillated concerning the question of whether or not an effective response to contemporary nihilism can be found: at times he optimistically foretold a reversal in the order of things, at other times he emphasised the unassailability of the system of simulation. Ultimately, however, his position is perhaps best expressed at those points where he declared that the optimistic and pessimistic hypotheses regarding the destiny of contemporary nihilism are themselves undecidable at the current time. The following reflections on technology are a good indication of this position:

*At the stage we are at, we do not know whether technology, having reached a point of extreme sophistication, will liberate us from technology itself – the optimistic viewpoint – or whether in fact we are heading for catastrophe.*⁷⁶

We are faced, ultimately, with two irreconcilable hypotheses: that of the extermination of all the world's illusion by technology and the virtual, or that of an ironic destiny of all science and all knowledge in which the world – and the illusion of the world – would survive. The hypothesis of a “transcendental” irony of technology being by definition unverifiable, we have to hold to these two irreconcilable and simultaneously “true” perspectives. There is nothing which allows us to decide between them.⁷⁷

Conclusion: “Nihilism – It is *ambiguous*...”⁷⁸

Was Baudrillard a nihilist? As I have attempted to show, any adequate answer to this question cannot be a simple one. Baudrillard's relation to nihilism is ambiguous in at least two senses: first, his strategy for responding to nihilism changed through the course of his *oeuvre*, and, second, there is a deep ambiguity

in the nature of contemporary nihilism itself as he analyzed it. On the first point, we have seen how Baudrillard's early attempt to respond to nihilism through an active nihilism associated with transgression and revolution remained implicated with a religious nihilism constituted by a nostalgia for symbolic exchange. Moving away from such nostalgia, Baudrillard theorized a simulated system which can absorb all opposition, and thus gave up on the dream of transgression and at times, it appears, succumbed to passive nihilism. In his later works, however, critical terms such as seduction and the Nothing suggest the possibility of a reversal in which the simulated system would achieve a state of complete nihilism, a state in which new forms of meaning become possible in a revalued world of appearance.

Because of the uncertain reversibility existing between simulation and seduction, however, Baudrillard suggested that things could go either way – the future is something he admitted he could not see. Following the approach that Baudrillard himself takes in various texts, I would therefore like to express Baudrillard's ultimate position on the problem of nihilism by presenting two “undecidable hypotheses”:

Passive nihilism. The system of simulation is too strong, hegemonic; all oppositions can be incorporated into the system, and seduction simply supports it. There is no more hope for meaning or value.

Complete nihilism. Seduction and the Nothing are ineradicable; the extension of simulation will achieve a reversal in the order of things; the revaluation of the world through the immortality of appearances.

This undecidability should not be attributed to any weakness in Baudrillard's critical thought or failing in his desire for a more meaningful world, but rather – and this remains true whether or not his diagnosis is in the last analysis correct – to the attempt to think rigorously the nature and implications of contemporary nihilism as he diagnosed it. Baudrillard's encounter with nihilism was arguably one of the most original and significant attempts to rethink Nietzsche's problematic in the light of recent developments in thought and culture. While this encounter is in need of further critical examination, and his conclusions are certainly open to question, such a critical examination will not take place so long as Baudrillard is dismissed as a nihilist on the basis of an over-simplified understanding of this term.⁷⁹ What I have attempted here, then, is a complication of Baudrillard's relation to nihilism which might act as a prolegomena to further study. To leave Baudrillard himself with the last word, perhaps the following is a fitting defence of his own adventures in the nihilist problematic and an apposite retort to those who would dismiss him as a nihilist out of hand:

*I find it curious, all those people who've read Nietzsche and the others, but nothing has rubbed off on them. How can you go on doing your own thing in your own little discipline as though nothing had happened?*⁸⁰

About the Author

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Endnotes

[1](#) – Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994:160; 162.

[2](#) – See, for example, Douglas Kellner. *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond*. Cambridge: Polity, 1989; Anthony King. “Baudrillard’s Nihilism and the End of Theory.” *Telos* 112, Summer (1998):89-106; Christopher Norris. “Lost in the Funhouse: Baudrillard and the Politics of Postmodernism.” *Textual Practice* 8.3 (1990):360-87 and *Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals, and the Gulf War*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1992.

[3](#) – Anthony King. “Baudrillard’s Nihilism and the End of Theory”. *Telos* 112, (Summer), 1998:89-90.

[4](#) – Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Will To Power*. New York: Vintage, 1968: § 3, 3.

[5](#) – For an indication of this debate, see Richard Schacht. “Nietzsche and Nihilism.” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* Volume 11, Number 1 (January, 1973):65-90.

[6](#) – Nietzsche. *The Will to Power*. New York: Vintage, 1968: § 22, 17.

[7](#) – Paul Foss. “Despero Ergo Sum” in *Seduced and Abandoned: The Baudrillard Scene*. André Frankovits (Editor). Glebe, N.S.W.: Stonemoss, 1984:14-15.

[8](#) – Douglas Kellner. Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond. Cambridge: Polity, 1989:120.

[9](#) – In doing so, to some extent I follow the lead of Victoria Grace, who seeks to defend Baudrillard explicitly against the charge of nihilism: Grace writes: “The criticism of nihilism is frequently posed on what are argued to be substantive grounds in relation to what Baudrillard actually has to say. But in my assessment, in relation to Baudrillard’s work this is never a very convincing position to adopt. I wonder, rather, if it isn’t easier to criticise Baudrillard for ‘nihilism’ than it is to attend to the epistemological issues arising when Baudrillard on the one hand seems to be saying a lot about ‘what is going on in the world’, but on the other hand offers nothing by way of ‘theory’”. (Victoria Grace. *Baudrillard’s Challenge: A Feminist Reading*. London: Routledge, 2000:2).

[10](#) – Jean Baudrillard. *Fragments: Conversations with François L’Yvonnet*. London; New York: Routledge, 2004:1.

[11](#) – *Ibid*.:2.

[12](#) – Alan White. “Nietzschean Nihilism: A Typology.” *International Studies in Philosophy*, Volume 14, Number 2, 1987:29-44. The exact typological classification of nihilism in Nietzsche’s thought is contestable, since he mentions numerous types of nihilism without employing an explicit system of classification. White’s argument for the typology he presents is convincing, however, and the picture of Nietzsche’s thought concerning nihilism that it paints is one shared by many commentators in broad outline if not always in exact detail.

[13](#) – The emphasis on these two types is my own; White identifies many types of nihilism which seem to belong to the level of radical nihilism.

[14](#) – See Nietzsche. *The Will To Power*, §12(A) and §12(B), 12-14 (“Decline of Cosmological Values”); Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols / The Anti-Christ*. London: Penguin, 1990:50-1 (“How ‘The Real World’ at last Became a Myth: History of an Error”).

[15](#) – Alan White. “Nietzschean Nihilism: A Typology.” *International Studies in Philosophy*, Volume 14, Number 2, 1987:31.

[16](#) – Nietzsche. *The Will to Power*, §2, 9. (Italics in original).

[17](#) – *Ibid.*: 13.

[18](#) – *Ibid.*, §22, 17.

[19](#) – *Ibid.*, §23, 18.

[20](#) – On this point, see Gilles Deleuze. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983, Section 5, Chapter 9, “Nihilism and Transmutation: the focal point.”

[21](#) – Alan White. “Nietzschean Nihilism: A Typology.” *International Studies in Philosophy*, Volume 14, Number 2, 1987:34.

[22](#) – Nietzsche. *The Will to Power*, Preface, §3, 3. Significantly, White translates this passage as reading the first *complete* [vollendeter] nihilist. White also notes, however, that in other places Nietzsche seems to reserve the position of complete nihilist for Zarathustra, for Dionysus, or for one to come at some future time, rather than attributing it to himself. White, 34-5.

23 – See Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

24 – A particular difficulty with my use of the term “meaning” (and its variants) here should be noted. This term is ambiguous in Baudrillard’s writings, as Grace explains: “On the one hand meaning is something ‘lost’ or disappearing, leaving humanity stranded and only able to fetishize the Dollar (Yen or Euro) as pure, empty sign of its own ambivalent despair (at this loss), and yet meaning carries the oppressive weight of those archetypal dualistic objectifications Baudrillard criticizes in his work: economic value, identity, the positivity of the sign”. (Victoria Grace, “Baudrillard and the Meaning of Meaning, *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* Volume 1, Number 1, (January, 2004): <http://www.ubishops.ca/BaudrillardStudies/grace.htm>

Part of the ambiguity here is between two senses of meaning: semantic meaning and existential meaning (meaning in life). Baudrillard thinks there is a link between these senses, and to simplify a point which will be fleshed out in detail below, the increase in semantic meaning corresponds with a decrease in existential meaning (and vice versa). This ambiguity explains how Baudrillard could both bemoan the loss of (existential) meaning in the world, and think that his task was to make the world less (semantically) meaningful. This ambiguity is sometimes avoided by using the term “significance” in place of existential meaning, but in Baudrillard’s case this is not helpful, since it is so closely related to “signification,” a form of semantic meaning Baudrillard critiques as inimical to existential meaning. Therefore, I will use the term “meaning” in both senses below, relying on context for disambiguation (where this is desirable). For further discussion of this complex issue, see Grace (as above).

25 – Jean Baudrillard. *The System of Objects*. London and New York: Verso, 1996; Jean Baudrillard. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: SAGE

Publications, 1998.

[26](#) – Roland Barthes. *The Fashion System*. London: Cape, 1985.

[27](#) – Jean Baudrillard: *Selected Writings*. Mark Poster (Editor). Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988:25.

[28](#) – *Ibid.* Baudrillard's phrasing here – “consumption is founded on a *lack*” – also echoes Jean-Paul Sartre's nihilistic analysis of human reality as founded on a lack and marked of necessity by endlessly deferred value. See Sartre. *Being and Nothingness*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1956, especially Part Two, Chapter One, Section III: “The For-Itself and the Being of Value,” 133-147.

[29](#) – Gary Genosko. *Baudrillard and Signs: Signification Ablaze*. London; New York: Routledge, 1994:36.

[30](#) – *Ibid.*

[31](#) – Jean-François Lyotard. *Libidinal Economy*. London: Athlone, 1993.

[32](#) – Jean Baudrillard. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St Louis: Telos, 1981.

[33](#) – It should be noted that Baudrillard's concept of the symbolic is radically distinguished from both Lacan's and Lévi-Stauss' use of the term. See Jean Baudrillard. *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. London: Sage, 1993:133 and 188, n.10.

[34](#) – See Jean Baudrillard. “When Bataille Attacked the Metaphysical Principle of Economy”. In *Bataille: A Critical Reader*. Fred Botting and Scot Wilson (Editors). Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.

[35](#) – *Ibid.*

[36](#) – Jean Baudrillard. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St Louis: Telos, 1981:128.

[37](#) – Julian Pefanis notes: “The vertical slash is a bar of exclusion, and has its origin in Lacan’s formulation using the linguistic sign:

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“no longer that which articulates [as in the Saussurean model]. But that which censors – and thus the locus of transgression”. (Jacques Lacan. *Écrits: A Selection*. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1977:161). Julian Pefanis. *Heterology and the Postmodern: Bataille, Baudrillard, and Lyotard*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991:144, n. 69.

[38](#) – Jean Baudrillard. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St Louis: Telos, 1981:146.

[39](#) – *Ibid.*: 163.

[40](#) – Jean-François Lyotard. *Libidinal Economy*. London: Athlone, 1993:104.

[41](#) – Lyotard employs this spelling because he is using the term in its psychoanalytic sense. In their classic lexicon of psychoanalysis, Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis define phantasy as follows: “Imaginary scene in which the subject is a protagonist, representing a fulfilment of a wish (in the last analysis, an unconscious wish) in a manner that is distorted to a greater or lesser extent by defensive processes”. Laplanche and Pontalis. *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. London: Karnac Books, 1973:314.

[42](#) – Jean-François Lyotard. *Libidinal Economy*. London: Athlone, 1993:105.

[43](#) – Jean Baudrillard. *The Mirror of Production*. St Louis: Telos, 1975: 38. Quoted in *Ibid.*:106.

[44](#) – Jean-François Lyotard. *Libidinal Economy*. London: Athlone, 1993:109.

Lyotard's argument is in fact more complex than I am able to present adequately here in summary form, and relies upon the claim that all political economies are libidinal economies – that is, all economies can be considered in terms of desires or affects and their circulation. The “great Zero” is a term Lyotard uses to designate religious nihilism.

[45](#) – Lyotard writes that “this society of gift and counter-gift plays, in Baudrillard's thought, the role of a reference (lost, of course), of an alibi (which cannot be found), in his critique of capital...The phantasy of a non-alienated region...begins religion all over again...his desire for return, so similar to that of Rousseau, gives itself free reign, weaving the absolutely Christian scenario of the martyr of the proletariat as the sacrificial episode necessary to the final salvation...” (Jean-François Lyotard. *Libidinal Economy*. London: Athlone, 1993:106-8).

[46](#) – Critical comments on Lyotard's “libidinal economy” may be found, for example, in Jean Baudrillard. *Forget Foucault*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1987 and in Jean Baudrillard. *Fragments: Conversations with François L'Yvonnet*. Trans. Chris Turner, London; New York: Routledge, 2004.

[47](#) – Jean Baudrillard. *The Ecstasy of Communication*. Sylvère Lotringer (Editor). New York: Semiotext(e), 1988:79-80.

[48](#) – On the way attempts to overcome nihilism are insidiously plagued by nihilism's return, see Howard Caygill. “The Survival of Nihilism” in *Nihilism Now!*:

Monsters of Energy. Keith Ansell Pearson and Diane Morgan (Editors). Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000.

[49](#) – Rex Butler identifies the origin of this paradox in Plato's *Cratylus*:

Socrates: Let us suppose the existence of two objects: one of them shall be Cratylus and the other the image of Cratylus, and we will suppose, further, that some god makes not only a representation such as a painter would make of your outward form and colour, but also creates an inward organisation like yours, having the same warmth and softness; and into this infuses motion and soul and mind, such as you have, and in a word copies all your qualities, and places them by you in another form. Would you say that this was Cratylus and the image of Cratylus, or that there were two Cratyluses?

Cratylus: I should say that there were two Cratyluses.

Plato. *Cratylus* in *The Dialogues of Plato* (Volume II). Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1875:257. Quoted by Rex Butler. "Jean Baudrillard's Defence of the Real: Reading *In the Shadows of the Silent Majorities* as an Allegory of Representation" In *Jean Baudrillard, Art and Artefact*. Nicholas Zurbrugg (Editor). Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 1997: 51.

[50](#) – Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994:159.

[51](#) – See Jean Baudrillard. *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (c 1976). London: SAGE, 1993:133 and 188, n. 9, respectively.

[52](#) – Two well-known examples of this strategy, from the essay "The Precession of Simulacra" (in *Simulacra and Simulation*) are Disneyland and Watergate. Baudrillard analyses Disneyland as the imaginary of America which maintains the very distinction between the real and the simulated or hyperreal. Disneyland is

posited by America as a simulated world in contrast to the “reality” of the rest of America, a strategy which, according to Baudrillard, hides the fact that the rest of America has passed into simulation. Similarly, Watergate was construed as a scandal by the American media to hide the fact that there is no scandal in politics anymore: the distinction between the scandalous and non-scandalous has broken down, but the belief in this distinction is perpetuated by the projection of Watergate as an imaginary “other” to quotidian politics. In each case, the projected imaginary maintains the illusion that the binary oppositions on which the system is founded are still operative, and the reference to the “real” which grounds these oppositions still functions. See the sections of this paper entitled “The Hyperreal and the Imaginary” and “Political Incantation,” 12-15.

[53](#) – It should be noted that the term “reversibility” is itself reversible regarding its valence in Baudrillard’s writings: while it is a fundamental feature of “positive” theories of meaning such as symbolic exchange and seduction, it is fatal to the semio-linguistic theory of meaning and simulation, and a fundamental trait of their nihilism.

[54](#) – Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994:19.

[55](#) – *Ibid.*:162-163.

[56](#) – *Ibid.*:163.

[57](#) – *Ibid.*

[58](#) – *Ibid.*:164.

[59](#) – Rex Butler. *Jean Baudrillard: The Defence of the Real*. London; Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: Sage, 1999:72.

[60](#) – Jean Baudrillard. *Fatal Strategies*. London: Pluto Press, 1990; Jean Baudrillard. *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*. London and New York: Verso, 1993.

[61](#) – Mike Gane. *Baudrillard's Bestiary: Baudrillard and Culture*. London; New York: Routledge, 1991:126-7.

[62](#) – Jean Baudrillard. *The Transparency of Evil*. New York: verso, 1993:3.

[63](#) – Jean Baudrillard. *Impossible Exchange*. New York: Verso, 2001.

[64](#) – *Ibid*:3.

[65](#) – This accordance is suggested by a comparison of the following representative passages. In *The Transparency of Evil*, Baudrillard writes: “The law that is imposed on us is a law of the confusion of categories. Everything is sexual. Everything is political. Everything is aesthetic. All at once’ (9). In *Impossible Exchange* he writes: ‘The economic sphere, the sphere of all exchange, taken overall, cannot be exchanged for anything...indeterminacy induces a fluctuation of equations and postulates at the very heart of the economic sphere and leads, in the end, to that sphere lurching off into speculation, its criteria and elements all interacting madly...The other spheres – politics, law and aesthetics – are characterized by this same non-equivalence, and hence the same eccentricity. Literally, they have no meaning outside themselves and cannot be exchanged for anything...this impossible equivalence finds expression in the increasing undecidability of its categories, discourses, strategies and issues” (New York: Verso, 1993:3-4).

[66](#) – *Ibid.*:4. The systems Baudrillard mentions here are economics, politics, law, and aesthetics.

[67](#) – *Ibid.*:7.

[68](#) – Considered as a quantifier, “nothing” simply indicates a quantity of zero, or null existence. Considered as a substantive, “nothing” indicates something which might have some sort of substantial existence, however mysterious. The nature of “nothing” has been a topic of philosophical debate since Ancient Greece. In the twentieth century, many philosophers have held the view that “nothing” should only be understood as a quantifier. For a discussion of these issues, see Stanley Rosen. “Thinking About Nothing” in *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy*. Michael Murray (Editor). New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978.

[69](#) – Jean Baudrillard. *Impossible Exchange*. New York: Verso, 2001:8. This is not a radical claim – the Latin word *existere*, from which “existence” is derived, means “to stand out from nothing.”

[70](#) – While I cannot expand on this point here, it is interesting to note the marked similarity of these themes with the thought of another German philosopher in whose broad shadow Baudrillard’s thought arguably moved. In his discussion of the Nothing, Baudrillard recalls Martin Heidegger’s treatment of the problem of nihilism. While Baudrillard names another source for his concept of the Nothing (the Argentinean writer Macedonio Fernandez) his use of this concept is reminiscent of Heidegger’s own play on the ambiguity of “Nothing” in “What is Metaphysics?”, and his insistence on the necessity of concealment in the process of ontological unconcealment. Like Baudrillard, Heidegger before him argued that the problem of nihilism had its source in the forgetting of an adequate thinking of the Nothing itself. Baudrillard marks this affinity with occasional references to

Heidegger, especially to the “secret” and the “stellar course of the mystery”, terms which Heidegger uses to indicate that Being keeps itself in secret promise, and cannot be entirely destroyed by contemporary nihilism. See Martin Heidegger. “What is Metaphysics?” in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*. David Farrell Krell (Editor). New York: Harper Collins, 1993 and Heidegger. “Nihilism as Determined by the History of Being” in *Nietzsche, Volume IV: Nihilism*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987.

[71](#) – In this work, the sophist Gorgias is generally taken to be trying to refute Parmenides’ argument that being is One by showing that it is just as easy to argue that nothing exists. The argument that nothing exists, then, is taken to be sophistical. However, the meaning of Gorgias’ argument – and how seriously it should be taken as a philosophical argument – is open to debate. The original version of this work is lost, but is recounted in Sextus Empiricus’ *Against the Professors* and in the anonymous (pseudo-Aristotelian) *On Melissus, Xenophanes, Gorgias*. See Sextus Empiricus. *Against the Professors*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1949 and Aristotle. *Minor Works*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1963.

[72](#) – *The Illusion of the End* Baudrillard calls this reversal “poetic reversal” because the only evidence for its possibility exists in language. Having drawn an analogy between the formalistic structures of language and capital, Baudrillard is in effect hoping for the possibility that the poetic, reversible effects found in language might also be found in capitalism and in contemporary society generally. See Jean Baudrillard. *The Illusion of the End*. Cambridge: Polity, 1994:120.

[73](#) – See, for example, the essay “The Irony of Technology” in Jean Baudrillard. *The Perfect Crime*. London; New York: Verso, 1996.

[74](#) – Jean Baudrillard. “Forget Foucault” in Forget Foucault / Forget Baudrillard. New York: Semiotext(e), 1987:71.

[75](#) – Jean Baudrillard. *Seduction*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990:176

[76](#) – Jean Baudrillard. *Passwords*. New York: Verso, 2003: 42.

[77](#) – Jean Baudrillard. *The Perfect Crime*. New York: Verso, 1996:74.

[78](#) – Nietzsche. *The Will to Power*, § 22, 17.

[79](#) – Here I follow Schacht, who makes a similar point regarding Nietzsche. Richard Schacht. “Nietzsche and Nihilism.” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* Volume 11, Number 1 (January, 1973):90.

[80](#) – Jean Baudrillard. *Fragments*. New York: Routledge, 2004:56.

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